

The Time to Be by Yourself

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The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed customary world politics into the background where it is likely to stay for a long time. Actually, this is what the year 2020, which has extended into 2021, will be remembered for. The political agenda itself has not changed, but the forced pause has turned out to be a freeze-frame giving us a chance to study the picture in detail. It became obvious that long-brewing changes in international relations had passed the point of no return. The thirtieth anniversary of the “unipolar moment” of the United States, proclaimed by Charles Krauthammer in 1990, signified that this moment had finally passed. And this will not change even now that politicians promising a return to the ideals and practices of “global leadership” have come to power in the U.S. again.

For Russia, the pandemic period has become a milestone, although no one has made loud statements

announcing a revision of the foreign policy. The new situation can be summarized in four points.

Firstly, in the former Soviet space (which is an undeniable priority) Russia stops its pursuit of unifying initiatives claiming universality;

Secondly, the prospect of building a special relationship with the West, above all Europe, considered until recently a potential partner in some kind of integration, is now gone completely.

Thirdly, distancing from the West does not mean an automatic “turn to the East.” In any case, it is not linear and is rather reserved.

Fourthly, the power potential (in the Russian case, its most classic form is military power) regains its role as the main foreign policy instrument. Work through international institutions is receding into the background.

Events in 2020 unfolded between two milestones: a sharp aggravation

in Idlib in February and an unexpected agreement on Karabakh in November. These events have three features in common: Moscow and Ankara are key players, the use of military force is the decisive factor, and international institutions are on the sidelines.

In Syria, at stake were the spheres and scale of Russia's and Turkey's influence. The latter made an attempt to consolidate and expand its acquisitions by force, which provoked a military response. This was followed by a new round of tough bargaining at the top level, resulting in a new temporary balance of power. Moscow and Ankara continue interacting with each other, although at the time of the aggravation it seemed that they were on the verge of a full-scale war.

In Karabakh, the background is completely different, but the pattern is similar. Turkey's intervention broke the existing status quo and reminded everyone that frozen conflicts could have a belligerent solution. Russia performed a military-diplomatic gambit, securing a stronger and lasting presence in the confrontation zone, but agreed that Ankara had acquired the status of another leading player.

In both cases, international structures, both formal and even largely informal, remained inactive. The Syrian issue is being resolved directly by the powers involved,

while the latest crisis in Idlib was handled without the "Astana trio," which until then had proved quite effective. In Karabakh, the OSCE Minsk Group is nominally in charge of everything, but now it is overboard and, in fact, is no longer taken into account by the parties involved.

It is no incident that Russian-Turkish relations have proven to be so indicative of the changes. Russia and Turkey are two major powers with a long imperial tradition that have been engaged in European politics for centuries and after the end of the Cold War opted for joining Western (European) institutions, but were deeply offended when they were denied full-fledged integration. The history of Moscow's and Ankara's relations with Europe is different, but the result is similar.

The actions undertaken by Russia and Turkey in 2020 were prompted by their deep disappointment with institutions and marked a return to their traditionally dominant power tactics.

This is the kind of policy that is risky and cannot always be fully calculated, but it yields results. For Russia, this is a very serious shift. Moscow was one of the architects of international institutions in the second half of the 20th century (the UN system), and then fought for their preservation and sought to

join the structures (Western), which the Soviet Union had never been part of, but which proclaimed their global status after the Cold War. In other words, although Moscow consistently criticized the “liberal world order,” it actually acted as a convinced advocate of its basic tenet declaring the primacy of institutions.

The gap started widening in the second half of the 2000s. Russia was less and less successful in pursuing its interests through international institutions, while steps taken outside of them turned out to be quite effective. Events in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 prove this. Developments in Syria in 2015 stand out, but even then Russia acted decisively on its own, rather than through authorized international structures. All this entailed considerable political and economic costs, which Moscow tried (not quite successfully) to minimize through the same institutions.

The transformation of relations between Russia and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is a vivid example. In 2013, the organization won the Nobel Peace Prize largely thanks to Vladimir Putin, who had proposed and then helped implement an elegant plan to destroy Syria’s chemical arsenals. Over the subsequent seven years, relations between Moscow and the OPCW degraded from constructive cooperation to

strong resentment. The main irritant now is the Navalny incident (and before that there were accusations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria). Russia relentlessly criticizes the organization for its biased and politicized approach and violation of procedures and rules, but to no avail. The OPCW firmly steers its way fully in line with Western countries’ policy. Moscow lacks influence and tools needed for adjusting this course for its own benefit. And there is no reason to believe that the situation will change.

This would be a serious problem for Russia if the abovementioned conflicts were unfolding in a stable liberal order. But it stops working, and the dysfunction of its institutions at various levels can no longer be hidden, while the resolution of issues on a case by case basis, rather than on a generally accepted legal one, becomes a universal norm. The pandemic highlighted and accelerated this trend. Even the most ardent followers of the institutional order of the world began to profess the supremacy of one’s own interests over common interests. Russia’s age-old habit of relying primarily on itself and its own strength is not an anachronism, as was believed during the heyday of the liberal order, but rational behavior. On the other hand, the abovementioned institutions, although going through a crisis, are turning into a means

of Western politics, and Russia will have to decide how to treat them further. This, perhaps, will be one of the most pressing issues to be faced by Russian diplomacy in the near future. Maintaining even formal participation means recognizing the rights of these institutions, which in the current situation would be harmful for Russia since it does not have exclusive possibilities in them (like those it has in the UN Security Council).

Relations with the West over the past thirty years are another derivative of the liberal order and Russia's desire to fit into it. What we sought and what we got has been described many times. What is important is that this period is over now. The abovementioned "Navalny case" became a watershed after which the EU and especially its leader, Germany, stopped to be viewed by Moscow as a partner for building a fundamentally different future. Officially, Russian diplomats interpret Berlin's behavior as surrender to Washington and abandonment of aspirations towards an independent role. In reality, everything is more complicated.

Germany's actions (to provide treatment for the Russian dissident who fell sick on Russian territory for unclear reasons, and use this topic for political purposes) obviously run counter to the pragmatic interests of both Berlin and Moscow. They can

be explained by Germany's desire to proclaim itself as the undeniable flagship of the European Union, consolidated in the face of Russia's changing in the "wrong" direction, growing China, the unreliable U.S., and so on. The benefits that Germany received for half a century from a special relationship with Russia are no longer seen as tempting enough, nor does Russia pose a threat that forced German chancellors to pay increased attention to Moscow since the 1950s.

Russia and Germany are not the only example, but the most indicative one. The mutual disappointment over the inability to build a "common European home," which was brewing for at least fifteen years, has led to disengagement.

Russia's indignation at the behavior of the EU and its individual countries is resonating with Europe's rejection of the Russian way of action. And again, it is important that this is happening at a time when the liberal world order, within which the abovementioned home was supposed to be built, is in decline. The most outstanding product of this order was European integration, which is now in jeopardy along with the EU itself. So Europe will exert every effort to rescue its creation, including at the expense of relations with other countries.

It has become habitual to say that by turning away from the

West Russia is turning towards the East, China, and rising Asia. Two opposite conclusions are drawn from this assertion. Either Russia is digging its own grave by throwing itself into the paws of a dragon and condemning itself to the position of either a servant or even a prey, or the solidifying relationship with the world's most promising power amid the West's decline will allow Russia to strengthen its position for decades to come.

In reality, the "East" towards which Russia is turning is Turkey rather than China, if we understand a turn as a transition to a certain mode of behavior, and not just a choice of current political and economic preferences. Russia's turn to Asia is rather sluggish as additional obstacles have vividly proved. As international relations expert Timofey Bordachev has aptly noted, in Asia there is no place for Russia to use its main advantage—considerable military capabilities on which its diplomatic potential relies. In Asia, economic potential is crucial, and this is not something we can boast about.

As a matter of fact, Vladimir Putin's recent remark that in principle he does not exclude a military alliance with China, although he does not see any need for it now, fits into the logic of Moscow's search for a niche in Asia so that it could capitalize on its main asset, so far not in demand there.

But it is in high demand in the post-Soviet space. Much has already been said that this is yet another momentous period for this. The countries that appeared in place of the former Soviet Union are living through development crises and taking the test of viability. This is happening almost everywhere albeit in different ways. For a long time, Moscow considered it necessary to create a framework structure that would unite most of the territory of the bygone country. The most advanced format so far is the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), although it actually betrays the fact that it cannot absorb all aspiring states (Ukraine, for example). Political turmoil in three of the five EAEU countries (Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan) and the desire to maintain relations with important states outside the Union (Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Uzbekistan) force Russia to use other principles that are more consistent with global trends. These include different approaches to different states, and again reliance primarily on power potential. In this sense, the Karabakh truce is a model case, because it was achieved by using force by request, not by imposing it.

Current associations existing under Russia's auspices are modeled after Western ones. The CSTO (post-Soviet NATO) and the EAEU (Eurasian version of the EU) were

conceived at a time when Euro-Atlantic institutions served as models. But this period ended along with the liberal order. Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East do not replicate Atlantic alliances, although this possibility was widely discussed some twenty years ago. This does not mean that the structures initiated by Russia need to be dissolved. They do have an effect, but they cannot be considered the main policy tools. Remarkably, the Union State of Russia and Belarus is a unique format that does not repeat other examples, and perhaps it has a future.

It has become customary to talk about “Russia’s loneliness” in the international arena. Further deterioration of relations with the West, confusion in neighboring countries, and the lack of obvious dynamics on the Asian track—all this seems to bear out the thesis of Russia’s loneliness. But how should this be evaluated now?

The experience of great powers clearly shows that “loneliness,” that is, pursuance of solely one’s own interests and reliance primarily on one’s own resources is the norm.

Great powers can build a coalition or allied relations if the situation so requires and for as long as

this may be necessary. Some countries did this more often, some (like the United States or China) almost never did. The second half of the 20th century, and especially the first two decades of the 21st century have taught us that institutional interaction and community expansion are the natural way of global political development. However, this period is just a brief moment and an exception in the history of international relations. Upon the end of the liberal order, the world is going back to the historical norm. The experience of institutions will not sink into oblivion, and they will not disappear overnight, but the direction of changes has already been determined. So, regarding “loneliness” as a problem of Russian politics as a whole would not make sense; we can only talk about opportunities or lack thereof in specific areas or on certain tracks—most importantly, opportunities for continuing internal development and ensuring the country’s sustainability in the “world of the previous norm.” However this is not a task for foreign policy to tackle, although it can certainly help solve it. But the ability to put things in order at home becomes a determining factor for the future of foreign policy.